

## ART. II.—CHARLOTTE BRONTË.

*Charlotte Brontë: a Monograph.* By T. WEMYSS REID. London: Macmillan & Co. 1877.

*A Note on Charlotte Brontë.* By ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE. London: Chatto & Windus. 1877.

NOT an eventful life, by any means, was that which began at Thornton—a somewhat ordinary one-street village set amongst the shaggy Yorkshire hills—on the 21st April 1816, and which ended in the staring parsonage-house at Haworth on the 31st of March 1855. A life, indeed, so devoid of interest that Mrs. Gaskell, who wrote it, had a difficulty in finding clay to make her literary bricks with, and had to use some irrelevant straw to eke out the tale. Indeed the principal events of Charlotte Brontë's thin career are adequately referred to in Mr. Wemyss Reid's excellent monograph, which is a work of modest dimensions, but of more than modest merit. Such as these so-called events were, we may trace some of their main features broadly here, leaving those who desire more, or more minute, information than we have the space or the will to give, to have recourse to some of the increasing sources of information which are coming to hand.

Mr. Wemyss Reid has a chapter on the "Posthumous Honours" which were conferred with the usual worldly justice—which gives when it may well withhold, and withholds when it might with benefit confer—but amongst all the praises which fell with a hollow sound on Charlotte Brontë's coffin, none were at all comparable to those which after a long silence—as if of careful meditation—have burst from Mr. Swinburne, and in more moderate and less fulsome strain from Mr. Reid himself. With this repentant mood of the critics, for long and unmerited neglect, we have no fault to find. If there is not always justice in their censures or their flatteries, there may possibly be a mean between these which lies in the direction of truth. When we come to speak of Charlotte Brontë's works, we shall see, if we can, whether real justice has now been done her; but here we would note the interest which must be felt in that remarkable little woman, with her common little figure, her projecting forehead, her unobtrusive ways, and her great performances in the region of pen and ink, when thus long after her death—long after Mrs. Gaskell's admirable biography—we find such a work as that of Mr. Reid, and such an

eloquent "Note" as that of Mr. Swinburne, given to and gratefully accepted by the public. It is quite true we wanted more information about that life which went quietly by us in "hadden grey" in the obscurity of that West Riding village, than it was in Mrs. Gaskell's power to give. So intricate a matter is biography that it cannot be treated with adequacy by a contemporary. The life which may have just gone from the midst of us was so spreading, so gadding an existence—even in the case of those with the narrowest circle and most limited intercourse—that it cannot be separated from its creeping dependence on the lives of a hundred other persons, and treated as if it were an independent thing. Life is in no sense an independent matter "fought for one's own hand," but a mingled thread made up of many fibres intertwined on the great loom of Chance and Change, with the spun destinies of a hundred others, and forming the strange web of which History is a far-away tracing and dim remembrance. To tear such a life from its connection, and to pretend to study it while suppressing much which may be disagreeable to those who survive, is to attempt a ludicrous impossibility. A life is a matter of action and reaction, of giving and taking, and it cannot be understood or realised except in the integrity of its relations. A play cannot be played out with half the actors on and half off the stage, and hidden from the auditorium, on account of their respected feelings. Mr. Reid very justly remarks that Mrs. Gaskell was not, at the time she wrote, in a position to do full justice to the life of Charlotte Brontë. Many persons very closely connected with the life that had to be written were still alive, and details which might be necessary, from the artist's point of view, had to be suppressed out of a decent deference to their feelings, quick with the sense of their recent loss. Besides, the materials for a complete biography were not at hand; for the materials for a biography of a woman whose grave is not yet green with the natural grass, and hirsute with the natural neglect of years, are very coy and hard to come at, and it is only when the shadows of oblivion are beginning to fall that these dim facts, like night birds, come out of their lurking-places.\* It is true, too, that it would at that time have been difficult to retrace Charlotte Brontë's steps without treading on a good many toes—sensitive or hypersensitive, as the case may be—which were still on the familiar path. Mrs. Gaskell was unable to avoid some such encounters;† but to avoid others, she had, it is probable, to deviate in some

\* See Mr. Reid's "Monograph," p. 189.

† Mr. Brontë said to Mr. Raymond, of "The New York Times," when he visited Haworth, "Well, I think Mrs. Gaskell tried to make us all appear as bad as she could" ("Monograph," p. 195).

places from the path she undertook to point out. But Mr. Wemyss Reid, while he fully appreciates these difficulties which to some extent frustrated Mrs. Gaskell's enterprise,\* seems to be unaware that they are still existent, and that they militate against the excellence of his own most careful work. True, much has been added to our knowledge of Charlotte Brontë, but we find that in most of the letters which are now printed for the first time in this country—although some of them appeared in an American magazine—the names of persons are expressed by X's and Y's, as if they were algebraical quantities, or with the strokes attached to these bare initials—as we print suppressed oaths. Then in some places we find him confessing that he cannot be more communicative, for the very reason which made Mrs. Gaskell's biography "necessarily incomplete." Thus, speaking of the period of Charlotte Brontë's engagement to Mr. Nicholls, he says: "Of the letters during these happy months of peace and expectation I cannot quote much; they are too closely intertwined with the life of those who survive to permit of this being done."† And while the story of her life at Brussels is sufficiently hinted at, it is not, possibly could not be, explicitly told. He does, however, argue that the writer of to-day is free from not a few of the difficulties and restraints which weighed upon the writer of twenty years ago, although he admits to being "oppressed by" a "feeling that the pen which can do full justice to one of the most moving and noble stories in English literature has not yet been found."‡ If that is so, we are convinced that it is not because the two pens which have traced these loving memorials of the "Life" and "Monograph" were not capable of doing that complete and fine justice which Charlotte Brontë merited, but because in the nature of things we must wait a further period before criticism can speak the whole truth. We must not attempt to write history with a microscopic but rather with a telescopic eye. We must take wide, not deep, views of men and things, seeing that in our records of surveys of lives or times we have to leave many of the characters in decent blank to save acute feelings, needless throes, or to tone down the acerbities of nature, so as to make our picture less offensive to those who are mixed in the field of our portraiture. One can understand how the whole effect is marred by these sacrifices. As we said, however, instalments of information about Charlotte Brontë are being paid, although somewhat slowly; and Mr. Wemyss Reid's work is on the whole a memorable contribution to this fund; while Mr. Swinburne's "Note" is a somewhat

---

\* See pp. 1 and 189.

† "Monograph," p. 174.

‡ "Monograph," Preface, p. viii.



remarkable addition to the criticisms we have already received, without stint, of her writings.

That Mrs. Gaskell only did partial justice to Charlotte Brontë's character might be abundantly clear from the very nature of biography. At best a human character in our heads or in our books is a synthesis of some stray glimpses, some random traits, and at the best the human soul can only be dimly depicted by means of these, while the breath of life which moves the portrait is not its own but another's. Still if that breath is breathed into its nostrils with true sympathy, we may get as a result what is vaguely called a "speaking likeness," something as different as the life which is supplied by transfusion is from the galvanic motion of a dead body, which latter is all the spring of action which most bookmakers can supply. In this sympathy Mrs. Gaskell was not wanting, and we are prepared, even while discounting her efforts, to admit the execution of a biography which has scarcely been equalled in these modern days, or—to use the words of Thackeray—a biography "necessarily incomplete, though most touching and admirable."

In one respect, however, according to our new informant, Mrs. Gaskell failed signally. She, without getting the advice which was given to Mr. Reid,\* "not to underrate" Charlotte Brontë's "oddity," took it, and has made her a somewhat strange, joyless being from her early youth to her premature death. She has too, we learn, mistaken the real turning-point in her career; has ascribed an accession of gloom to the weird episode connected with Branwell Brontë's ruin and tragic fate, instead of to the deep and heart-rending experience which she had at Brussels. Mr. Reid wishes to make out that Charlotte Brontë was "not naturally a morbid person," † that "her life was by no means so joyless as the world now believes it to have been," ‡ and that though "gay her existence could not be called," her letters show "that it was unquestionably peaceful, happy, and wholesome." § Well, to some extent he makes good his point. Without doubt the episodes—some harrowing enough—of her life in Brussels had a very marked effect upon her character. But even allowing for this change, we cannot see that her life, even before she went abroad, was a very cheerful one. Indeed we are constrained to take a moderate view of the happiness which she enjoyed even in those young days when, if at any time in life, happiness ought to be in full possession. Without endeavouring to sketch the character of Charlotte Brontë's father, the mention of some of its features, as they are known to us, would suggest the impossibility of a very happy home in the

\* "Monograph," p. 231.

† Ibid., p. 2.

‡ Ibid. See also p. 39.

§ Ibid., p. 44.

Haworth parsonage-house for his children. We wish to say no ill of the dead, and in the case of Mr. Brontë such a proverb would have double force ; for it seems that before his death he had changed much, and that if he came into the world and passed through it like a lion, he went out like a genial lamb ; that his harsh, rough, vain old self died long before he himself passed away. But if the character of Mr. Helstone in " *Shirley* " is a daughter's likeness of Mr. Brontë—drawn by a loving, patient, and long-suffering daughter too—he cannot have been a man to make the parsonage-house much of a "home" for his motherless children. That he was polite to strangers, that he had a great admiration for the stern rectitude he found among his flock, cannot have compensated to those of his household for his passionate, vain, self-willed, and habitually cold demeanour to those who had the closest claims on his kindness and such urbanity as he possessed. We can see the sharp-eyed old man, his chin buried in the starched tower of his white neckcloth, take his at first sulky, then passionate offence at the pretty figured dress over which the woman's heart of his gentle wife was rejoicing with harmless vanity and happy gratitude. Not many pretty bright things came to the grey parsonage-house ; and when that parcel came and disclosed from its brown-paper wrappage the gay gift within, we could understand the dim eyes of the mother and of the little ones, whose tiptoe curiosity surround the table, being lit with the fine light of rare happiness. But these very lights made Mr. Brontë the more wrathful ; and his pride and passion were not sated by a harsh command that the dress should not be worn, but wreaked their poor vengeance on the gaudy stuff, which he cut in pieces, which became kaleidoscopic through the shifting lenses of his wife's tears—and withdrew to his own room to have his meal alone, as was his wont.

Perhaps, as Charlotte suggests of that fiery rector Mr. Helstone, he ought to have been a soldier—at least he took martial ways of calming his ruffled spirits. He not only carried loaded pistols in his pockets, but used to riddle the door of an outhouse with bullets when excited. It must have sounded strange to the villagers who sat in the church on Sunday and heard the doctrines of a religion of peace, to hear this quite other sermon from their vicar, and to see the effects of his discourse on that poor fetish the barn door. We learn, too, from these veracious pages before us, that this man whose anger was wont to speak even with the lips of a pistol, could stoop to an almost contemptible cunning to gain his poor ends. We can scarcely imagine a happy childhood spent in his vicinity. No wonder that the children never were children, and that when on a rare occasion some of the Sunday scholars were invited to the parsonage, the Brontës had to be taught how

to play before they could associate in glee with these little companions. We know of few sadder records than that of these motherless children having to ask to be taught to play. Their games, if games they can be called, were grim enough, and remind us of the feeble efforts of the dingy swallows at Thraves Inn, or some other abode of two or three sooty trees amidst mouldy buildings, which, according to Dickens, with a daring imagination said to one another, "Come let us play at Country." The Brontës seem to have been like old people who had agreed to play at being children, and who had succeeded but ill. To us there is something sad in the inverted image of the big world in the dark shallows of their poor little lives in the parsonage which they thought "play," and which was so unlike the happy exuberance of real childhood, which makes and dwells in a beautiful world of crumbling romance all unknown to the paltry squalor of reality.

But there were occasions, other than these, for tears rather than smiles, in these early days. If the picture in "*Jane Eyre*" be a correct one of the charitable institution at which Charlotte Brontë spent some of her school-days—and we cannot doubt that it is photographic—we can scarcely believe that much happiness fell to her lot there. One thing Charlotte Brontë said of the Lowick Institution,\* which Mr. Reid here proves to have been true of Cowan Bridge School, and that is, that "during the whole time of their sojourn there, the young Brontës scarcely ever knew what it was to be free from the pangs of hunger."† It was at that time, too, that Charlotte was initiated into the great blank mystery of death; for it was during her stay at that stern place, under its cold penurious roof, and amidst its debasing associations, that she lost her two eldest sisters. That even at that early age (nine years) she felt the loss poignantly, we cannot doubt. And all these elements go to make no pleasing picture of girlish days. Then, again, although her fear of strangers and shyness in their presence may have been natural, it was a fact, and, as we see from the pages of this memoir,‡ it must have marred much of the enjoyment she might otherwise have had, and precluded the relief from the tedium of a dim life and sombre ways which she might otherwise have secured. Then the letters upon which Mr. Reid principally relies to prove his case scarcely bear out his argument. The fun in these is to our ear for the most part forced, the melancholy is the prevailing and natural key. We question whether the sentences on page 35—"Now, Ellen, laugh heartily at all that rodomontade. But you have brought it on yourself"—are

\* "*Jane Eyre*," chapters vii. and xi.

† "*Monograph*," p. 26.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 33.



rightly described by Mr. Reid as "the burst of laughter," and certainly those letters which are printed on pages 49 and 50 of the "Monograph" are not such letters as we should have hoped for from a blithe girl about twenty years of age. Of these Mr. Reid himself says, "The woman who was afterwards accused of 'heathenism' was going through tortures such as Cowper knew in his darkest hours, and like him was acquiring faith, humility, and resignation in the midst of conflict."\*

Still some of her letters of this period are undoubtedly as he describes them, "cheerful and even merry;" and there are some, although not many, countervailing lights to be set against these shadows in the balance of chiaroscuro in her life at this time. Thus she had a real living friendship formed at Roehead School, to which she went subsequently to her miserable residence at that "charitable institution;" and where, if we judge aright, her days were passed in peace and comfort. This friendship was intense in its affection and wholesome in its effects. She says in one of her letters of Miss Ellen Nussey with truth, "I have lavished the warmest affection of a very hot tenacious heart upon you." Her affection and respect, too, for Miss Wooler, her attached teacher, was not without its pleasing and salutary influence upon her days. Her life as a governess was not pleasant to her. Her books are an epic of governesses, but if one wishes to know her real sentiments as to that life which for a time she led, he may find them legibly written down as if from the words of Mrs. Prior in "Shirley," and she has even more directly described the "cup of life as it is made for the class termed governesses" as particularly distasteful to her. Mr. Reid, wishing to look at the best side, says that this life was "not unbearable," and thinks sympathy has been thrown away in this direction. Perhaps he brightens the picture a little, but not much.

But besides the flowers which friendship planted beside her rough path, there seem to have been others which "glinted" into her days, and gave them light and fragrance. From what we can gather of the truth of the episodes of these days, the fancy of Charlotte Brontë seems to have been taken by some one who brought to friendship the intoxicating element of difference of sex. Charlotte, from all we know of her character, seems to us to have been a very woman. It is true Miss Martineau said of her, that "in her vocation she had, in addition to the deep intuitions of a gifted woman, the strength of a man, the patience of a hero, and the conscientiousness of a saint," but we cannot help thinking that the phrase "strength of a man" is misapplied or misleading. Much more accurately has Elizabeth Barrett Browning applied a similar

---

\* "Monograph," p. 51.

epithet where she speaks of George Sand as "large-brained woman and large-hearted man." Charlotte Brontë's strength was peculiarly womanly strength and endurance, and not manly courage. Speaking as Lucy Snowe, she describes herself in one sentence in "Villette." "I fear a high wind," she says, "because storm demands that exertion of strength and use of action I always yield with pain; but the sullen downfall, the thick snow descent, or dark rush of rain ask only resignation, the quiet abandonment of garments and person to be drenched."\* This attitude with regard to the weather is, no bad illustration of her attitude to the larger weather of life, which is the warring of elements both in the upper and nether firmament. She was a true woman from beginning to end, and while she lacked some of the deepest intuitions of woman—as, for instance, the crowning motherly intuition, which we can nowhere find in her character as written in her works—she possessed the other fine intuitions of her sex in a more than ordinary degree. She was not indifferent to her want of attractiveness—no true woman would be. She was far from indifferent to that dearer, stronger friendship, which even before her sojourn in Brussels seems to have been offered her. Her very loneliness made her look with more anxiety to the time when the great passions of life might make up to her for the lack of those lesser passions and feebler sentiments which are the stuff of zealous friendship and acquaintance. She had not frittered away her heart in random loves, and had all her woman's nature to give to some burning impulse. That she had no presentiment of a mother's love made this one passionate presentiment all the stronger. She looked to a heaven of love to redress the inequalities of justice which had been wreaked upon her young life, upon her shy solitude. As yet she had clung to the known, the familiar, the intimate, and she naturally looked forward to the time when to these lesser loves should be added the grander passion which should replace the stolid love of custom and wont with the fire of intoxicating novelty and answering affinity.

But like a true woman, with the qualities we have alluded to, she could look for such a high fruition of her hope only from some one quite different from herself—some one with a quality for each one of her wants—some one who instead of the slow gift of endurance should have the quick gift of command—some one in whom she could "to the finest fibre of her nature" feel an absolute sense of fitness and correspondence to herself. Even in these days, if we judge rightly from the sparse records, she thought she had found some one who would answer these exorbitant requirements. A man! a master! A fine strong man, not with-

---

\* "Villette," chapter xxxiv.



out faults, but dearer for them. Rough as she was smooth ! Possibly, nay probably, as in most of these cases, she was labouring under a schoolgirl's mistake. We often clothe people in fine robes from the wardrobe of imagination, and do not see that the bundle of shrunk shanks inside is ludicrously inadequate in their rickety disproportions to such fine trappings. It seems certain that in this case Charlotte Brontë very soon found out that the gruff being she had pictured as a lion was only in the borrowed hide of a more daring heart, and hid long ears and a timid braying heart under all that mane. No harm was done permanently to her heart by this first fancy, but she recurred to the encounter with its experiences long after, and had her first girl's love before her mind when she described Rochester.

We think we may take it that she went to Brussels heart-whole ; but it was there, if we may believe Mr. Reid and Charlotte Brontë herself, that the real mischief was done. This, according to the author of the "Monograph," was the turning-point. He does not, as we said before, speak very explicitly about her life at Brussels ; but we think his utterances have no doubtful sound when taken in connection with Charlotte Brontë's autobiographical novel "Villette."

Indeed we must remember that Charlotte Brontë has given us more real autobiographical matter than any writer of fiction. Her want of wide experience—she had no lack of deep experience, and knew some natures from the froth to the dregs—made her dependent upon herself and those who were closely connected with her for her subject-models. She did not invent much. She was in truth more a writer of veritable history than of unvarnished fiction. She takes her characters from actual life. Her incidents she borrowed from the real facts which fell under her own observation. The places she describes were all familiar to her. Thus, as we have seen, we must read "Cowan Bridge School" for "Lowick Institution," and some terrible chapters in "Jane Eyre" pass out of fiction into history. In "Shirley" all the scenes are real ones, and Mr. Reid gives pictures of "Fieldhead" and "Briarfield" Church in this "Monograph." Villette was Brussels. We have seen, too, that we have biographical matter relating to Mr. Brontë when we read of the "gallant old Cossack Helstone." Caroline Helstone was her friend Miss Nussey. Shirley Keeldar was her sister Emily, the consummate author of "Wuthering Heights." We think readers familiar with her works will recognise the Rochester of "Jane Eyre" and the Robert Moore of "Shirley" in two friends mentioned in a letter printed on page 65 of Mr. Wemyss Reid's work. The Mr. Macarthy, with his "steady-going clerical faults," mentioned at the end of "Shirley" as the successor of the "rampant boisterous" Mr. Malone, is Mr. A.

Nicholls, who was afterwards her husband. But, as we have said, not only are places and persons excerpts from actual fact, but most of the incidents are inventions rather of the chance which rules the world than the genius which made the book. Thus the brave cautery performed by Shirley Keeldar when bitten by a dog she supposed to be mad, the courage with which she bore this horrible self-surgery, and patience with which she kept the sickening secret from others, are not inventions but simple facts, and the story passes out of the region of fiction into that of domestic history when we read "Emily Brontë," for "Shirley Keeldar" throughout. Then in a letter printed in the "Monograph" on pages 82 and 83, we think we find reference to facts upon which the story of James Helstone as told in "Shirley" is founded. But passing from these illustrations of her method to the actual autobiographical facts, we find that in Lucy Snowe we have Charlotte Brontë. The Dr. John of "Villette" and the four letters are not without their counterpart in Charlotte Brontë's real experience, although there is an intentional transposition of dates in this reference. Then Lucy Snowe's visit to the confessional is not a fancied incident. Charlotte Brontë, "during one of the long lonely holidays in the foreign school, when her mind was restless and disturbed, her heart heavy, her nerves jarred and jangled, fled from the great empty schoolrooms to seek peace in the street, and she found not peace, perhaps, but sympathy at least, in the counsels of a priest seated at the confessional in a church into which she wandered, who took pity on the little heretic and soothed her troubled spirit without attempting to enmesh it in the folds of Romanism." \* But is there not much more truth in "Villette" than these stray illustrations? May we not in Madame Beck have some likeness of Madame Héger? and might we not find a real prototype for Paul Emanuel himself?

Let us ascertain how Mr. Reid deals with the history of her stay in Brussels, and then find out what Charlotte Brontë herself says. "Up to the moment of that visit," says Mr. Reid, "she had been a simple, kindly, truthful Yorkshire girl endowed with strange faculties, carried away at times by burning impulses, moved often by emotions, the nature of which she could not fathom, but always hemmed in by her narrow experiences, her limited knowledge of life and the world." Well, what happened there? She was a pupil and afterwards a teacher in Madame Héger's *pensionnat*, and that was the "turning-point in her life which changed its currents and gave it a new purpose, a new meaning. . . . She learnt much during her two years' sojourn in the Belgian capital, but the greatest of all lessons she mastered

---

\* "Monograph," p. 62.

while there was that self-knowledge, the taste of which is so bitter to the mouth though so wholesome to the life." \* A little further on we find these words quoted from a letter of Charlotte Brontë's written many years after that time of "storm and stress:" "I returned to Brussels after aunt's death against my conscience, prompted by what then seemed an irresistible impulse. I was punished for my selfish folly by a total withdrawal for more than two years of happiness and peace of mind." And Mr. Reid adds, "Why did she thus go back 'against her conscience'? Her friends declared that her future husband dwelt somewhere within sound of the chimes of St. Gudule, and that she insisted upon returning to Brussels because she was about to be married there. We know now how different was the reality. . . . *Yet none the less had her spirit, if not her heart, been captured and held captive in the Belgian city.*" † And then, after telling us that the whole truth is not to be found in the letters of this period—and certainly most of them are reticent, and in one she says she cannot put on paper what she would like to pour out into the ear of confidence—he concludes: "Yes, she was 'disillusioned' now, and she had brought back from Brussels a heart which could never be quite so light, a spirit which could never again soar so buoyantly as in those earlier years when the tree of knowledge was still untasted and the mystery of life still unrevealed." ‡ And finally he tells us what we think no one could doubt, that in Lucy Snowe we possess the truest picture of the real Charlotte Brontë, and that not a few of the fortunes which befell this strange heroine are literal transcripts from her own life.

With this assistance and other stray words which Mr. Wemyss Reid lets fall, § may we not surmise with certainty how it happened with Charlotte Brontë at Brussels? Was there not a real Paul Emanuel, a "magnificent-minded, grand-hearted, dear, faulty little man," who made himself very dear to that lonely, unlovely, unfriended woman? Was there not a real man who, "unknown and unloved, I held him harsh and strange—the low stature, the wiry make, the angles, the darkness, the manner displeased me. Now penetrated with his influence and living by his affection, having his worth by intellect and his goodness by heart—I preferred him before all humanity." || Is this not a real confession which a heart remembering its old emotions might make almost with the privilege of secrecy, through the medium of fiction, to the public ear? To us it seems certain that there was such a short, sinuous, dark, angular, irascible man; that he was

---

\* "Monograph," pp. 58, 59.

† Ibid., p. 60.

‡ Ibid., p. 61.

§ Ibid., pp. 63, 222, 224, 225.

|| "Villette," chapter xli.



at one time Charlotte Brontë's teacher or professor; that at first he was scarcely noticed, that subsequently he was secretly feared, then as secretly admired, and last of all loved by this English girl. He was unattractive, he was even repellant at first with his sudden manners and quick irascibility; he may even, like that real scheming Madame Beck, have pried into the governess's desk, and at first left only the smell of cigar-smoke, but afterwards the comfitures which showed that he had sometimes kindly thoughts under his harsh mask of demeanour. When he was looked at more narrowly he was found to have power with his vehemence, was no purposeless fumer but an impetuous doer. His eyes were jetty, but they had sometimes a soft kindness in them; his voice rang like a trumpet from the *estrade*, but it could sound with a soft coo under its clanging tones. He had defects, but they proved him to be a *man*. He was strange and strong, and firm and kind, and to him the lonely governess, who had been lonely all her life, to whom even the world seemed a foreign country, and this Brussels doubly foreign as compared with the bleak moors of Yorkshire, turned her reverent eyes and hungry heart. That she was unlovely made his kindness doubly dear to her; that he had faults, that he was not loved, that he was feared, that he too was lonely, made her love the more necessary to him. Besides, he was a strong man, and Charlotte Brontë never could have loved a fribble or a fool. She has a contempt for the feather brain of De Hamal; but the force and imperiousness of a Rochester could have won her, and of Paul in his anger she says, "He was roused, and I loved him in his wrath with a passion beyond what I had yet felt." \* She was a woman to be won by capture not by *con-venance*. Paul Emanuel is too real for fiction. Every touch is a dogged piece of pre-Raphaelite portraiture. But if there was love, there was no marriage—that we also know. That some obstacle existed to their union is more than probable from "Villette" itself, but that the obstacle was far other than is there hinted at seems also likely. The remorse over that return to Brussels "against her conscience" points to the fact that others had rights to his love and him which negatived her heart's urgent claim as that of a usurper. To us it seems more than probable that Madame Beck had more reason to be a detective in her own house than appears from "Villette." Her character as shown in these vivid pages is not pleasing, but it is not easy to understand her conduct until just at the end Lucy Snowe explains that she too desired Paul Emanuel's love. May not the real explanation be that she had such right as marriage could give her to that inflammable commodity? This seems to us an explanation, if not *the*

---

\* "Villette," chapter xli.

explanation of Charlotte Brontë's hatred for the woman who sat for Madame Beck, a hatred which not only finds full vent in the pages of "Villette,"\* but which she quite irrelevantly, but with genuine bitterness, has introduced incidentally into "Shirley," where she says, "I remember once seeing a pair of blue eyes that were usually thought sleepy, secretly on the alert, and I knew by their expression—an expression which chilled my blood, it was in that quarter so wondrously unexpected—that for years they had been accustomed to silent soul-reading. The world called the owner of these blue eyes '*bonne petite femme*' (she was not an Englishwoman). I learned her nature afterwards—got it off by heart—studied it in its farthest, most hidden recesses—she was the finest, deepest, subtlest schemer in Europe."†

All this, to our mind, points to the reason why her love for Paul Emanuel never could be crowned with marriage, and explains her years of remorse for a return to Brussels when she knew the insuperable obstacles to sanctioned love, and the claims which Holy Mother Church had given that jealous, cunning, scheming woman to Paul Emanuel's fidelity. Any one who will read the strange history of passion which is written in "Villette" will know more of the truth of Charlotte Brontë's stay in Brussels than if a dozen biographers had undertaken to tell him the whole truth. We have failed, however, if we have led the reader to suppose that there was anything criminal in this love. She had a heart of lava, but a flesh of snow. "Villette" is true in every particular, and there never was more love-making between these twain than between Lucy Snowe and Paul Emanuel. In this light we can understand her unwillingness to alter the ending of "Villette," even on the persuasion of her father. She must be true to the stern facts, and even entreaty will not make her write a happy ending to her book, and she will yield only in so far as to "veil the catastrophe."‡ It was no wonder that on her return to Haworth, with the memory of these fiery chapters in her life, she was a woman full of sorrow; no wonder that she sought action to deaden the pain which inaction gives us time to gloat over in agony. "What I wish for now is active exertion—a stake in life," she says in one of her letters. "I know life is passing away, and I am doing nothing, earning nothing—a bitter knowledge it is, but I am no way out of the mist," she writes in another; and she puts almost the same words in the mouth of Caroline Helstone§ when she is yearning for love which will not come her way, yearning for one who cannot be hers. It was then she began to write first poetry.

---

\* "Villette," chapter viii.

† "Monograph," p. 255.

‡ "Shirley," chapter xiv.

§ "Shirley," chapter xii.

“A use in measured language lies  
Like dull narcotics numbing pain.”

And the result of her then labours we have in the triune volume of 1846. She over and over again speaks of the efficacy that lies in such work to relieve heartaches the most poignant. She makes Shirley Keeldar, while speaking of Cowper, say, “That gift of poetry, the most divine bestowed on man, was, I believe, granted to allay emotions when their strength threatens harm.” \* And again, when conversing with Henry Simpson, who says, “I’ll write a book that I may dedicate it to you,” she says, “You will write it that you may give your soul its natural release.” † To this end these poems of Charlotte Brontë may have contributed; but other and better work lay to her hand, and was begun when the three sisters sat down in that dull Haworth parsonage and began “The Professor,” “Wuthering Heights,” and “Agnes Grey.” The three great rivers of Scotland—the Clyde, the Tweed, and the Annan—all take their feeble rise in the side of one bare hill, and thence take their varied courses down through rough valleys, fattening plains, populous cities, from whence they bear the fleets of commerce to the sea. But when did three such works as these have such a humble and neighbour source? Here we have only to do with one of these. Most readers know that “Currer Bell,” ‡ having started with the determination that her hero was “never to get a shilling he had not earned,” no sudden turns of fortune which were to “lift him in a moment to wealth and high station, and he was not even to marry a beautiful girl or a lady of rank”—“as Adam’s son, he should share Adam’s doom, and drain throughout life a mixed and moderate cup of enjoyment”—wrote a somewhat dull novel, and that it was rejected by the publishers to whom the MS. was intrusted. That the manuscript was not so dull as the publishers, events have proved, for there are very few who cannot read “The Professor” now with interest and admiration, and a “Reader” ought to have foreseen that. However, “Currer Bell” gave her publishers another chance, and sent them “Jane Eyre.” That they accepted and published in 1848, and pressed for more books of a like sort, and so “Shirley” and “Villette” were given to the world. While these literary labours were progressing,

---

\* “Shirley,” chapter v.

† Ibid., chapter xii.

‡ It is suggested with some probability that the *nom de plume* of “Bell” was taken by the sisters from the Haworth chimes, which were the one good thing about Haworth in those days—so good that those who loved such large-scale landscape music used to go up to the top of Ilkley Moor to hear those famous “bells.”



Charlotte Brontë was resident at Haworth, but Haworth shorn of many of the attractions which had formerly made it tolerable. Branwell, who was long remembered and loved in the village, after a career which had stained his name and brought infinite sorrow into the parsonage-house, died tragically standing—and was buried. Emily, too, the greatest of them all, had borne patiently till the end, putting aside sympathy; but when that end was wellnigh come she whispered, “I will see a doctor now if you send for him,” and then passed away. Anne, too, had gone, and there was now no one left in the parsonage-house but the old man and his famous daughter, who took her fame very quietly; for after all it was not fame that was the wish of her woman’s heart, but love. That, however, was not for her. True it is that she was loved: first by one concerning whom she speaks in several of her letters to her friend Ellen,\* and again with a long patient love by Mr. Nicholls, to whom she was ultimately married. At first all thought of this presumptuous love was scouted by Mr. Brontë, and Mr. Nicholls was driven from Haworth. Charlotte Brontë had compassion for him at this time, but no love. Indeed, even when her father’s strange mood changed, and he became as imperiously anxious for the marriage as he had before been opposed to it, when Mr. Nicholls had returned to Haworth and was actually engaged to Charlotte Brontë, we do not find that she was in love with him; rather, it would seem that she was coerced into marrying him by circumstances. A woman who writes thus of the man she is going to marry, and that woman is Charlotte Brontë, is not in love: “I hope Mr. C. and Mr. Nicholls may meet some day. I believe mutual acquaintance would in time bring mutual respect; but one of them, at least, requires *knowing* to be *appreciated*. And I must say that I have not yet found him to lose with closer knowledge. I make no grand discoveries, but I occasionally come upon a quiet little nook of character which excites esteem.”† It was not thus she wrote of Dr. John, of Rochester, her first love, of Paul Emanuel, her last. But here again are some words written immediately after marriage: “I trust I feel thankful to God for having enabled me to make a right choice, and pray to be enabled to repay as I ought the affectionate devotion of a truthful, honourable, and unboastful man.” Four

---

\* It is probable that the “Dr. John” episode which is made use of in “*Villette*” really belongs to this period of her life, for we see that so closely had she followed facts in that novel that she feared she might have made her translations too literal, and allowed the MS. to pass into the hands of the original “Dr. John.” “*Monograph*,” p. 141.

† “*Monograph*,” p. 172.

months after marriage she writes, "People don't compliment me as they do Arthur—excuse the name—it has grown natural to use it now." Excuse the name! There is not much love yet. It may be increasing, but here is a confession written about six months after marriage: "He is well, thank God, and so am I, and he is 'my dear boy' certainly—dearer now than he was six months ago. In three days we shall actually have been married that length of time." \*

Concerning Mr. Nicholls we of course need say nothing here. He seems to have loved the woman long and earnestly, and the writer little. Perhaps he was a little jealous of her books, or of some people in them. He discouraged her continued labours in the field of literature, but his discouragements would not have been enough to stop obedience to the high behests of her nature, for we know that she commenced another story of friendless girlhood.† But the great discouragement came. Sudden illness and peremptory death summoned her; and the quiet, uneventful, but troubled life came to an end, and another now famous name had to be added to the already long list on the tablet under the organ-loft in Haworth Church.

Now what are we to say of Currer Bell? Of the woman we can speak no words which would not echo the high and pure praise given in Mr. Wemyss Reid's work. Of the infamous slanders which were vilely circulated to her detriment during her pure, quiet, and simple life we could speak with indignation, had not a master of the art already denounced the sources of such base calumny in burning language. Now it seems to us no injustice can be done to Charlotte Brontë as a woman.

As a writer, however, injustice may be and has been done to her. Mr. Wemyss Reid points out the neglect which has followed the sudden popularity once accorded to her works, and that neglect is to our thinking quite unmerited. But it would, we conceive, have been easier to speak with weighed praise of these admirable performances had not Mr. Swinburne, with a liberality of flattery and a lavishness of praise which flows in melodious sentences of vivid prose through the pages of his "Note," done her more than justice, or—if he has not done her more than justice—had not in his comparisons done others less. We confess we are far outpraised by Mr. Swinburne. Nothing that we could say of Charlotte Brontë's merits would sound adequate after Mr. Swinburne's sonorous eulogy and snarling comparisons. True, it is difficult to ascertain the rank of such a woman in literature without comparing her with others; but when the

\* "Monograph," p. 179.

† Published in "Cornhill Magazine," April 1860.

comparison is founded on nothing but that ultimate resource of critics, "his own instinct," and when from that arbitrary standpoint vials of unpunctuated wrath are poured upon some who to the *instincts* of others' may seem more than comparable to Charlotte Brontë, one is apt to retaliate upon the flatterer with a want of justice to the person flattered. We should wish above all things to avoid this. While differing from some of the views expressed by Mr. Swinburne, we agree with him in much. Few poets are gifted with Mr. Swinburne's critical faculty, and he has read the very heart out of Charlotte Brontë's works; but he is more in sympathy with the strong pulsating heart of the "fiery-hearted vestal of Haworth" than with the calmer rhythm of that of Fielding, of Scott, of Thackeray, or George Eliot. He admires the absorbing oneness of Curren Bell, but has no width to appreciate the manifoldness of these; and he seems even to detract from the great master Cervantes himself in his comparison between Don Quixote and Paul Emanuel. True, we find in this "Note" perspicuous glances into the very pith and marrow of more books than we have here to do with. His criticisms of "Daniel Deronda" and the "Mill on the Floss" are not mere eloquent bluster, but are fine nervous appreciations of the real merits and real defects of a master's works. He does kind justice to George Eliot's children, which deserve kindly treatment, and compare very favourably with the dim realisation of childhood which could give us Jane Eyre, the Yorkes, and Paulina Home as denizens of the joyous world, which laughs the 'work-a-day world out of its place. Curren Bell had no notion of what a child was, and seems to have thought that gnarled human crab-trees grew into fine blossoming apples. These appreciations—and other true but sweeping condemnations of some commanding rubbish of the present day—indicate his marvellous critical faculty, and also his acute sense of real justice. But when we come to the real central merit of Curren Bell, we think we find that he has lost the scales of justice, and has nothing but the eye-bandage and sword left, with which latter he makes some rude havoc on those with whom he compares her great merits.

Mr. Swinburne is right in his canon of criticism. What we have to look for from such a writer is the supreme power of "painting and handling of human character in mutual relation and reaction." This is no new canon; it is a recognised rule. We require the writer to body forth human beings in such shape and guise that we can realise them not as clever sketches but as familiar friends. True studies of character must be addressed to those who know what character is. Writers are not supposed to write for born idiots. But given the man of



real knowledge and experience of the world, the writer who can make him realise in bodily presence, in mental constitution, in action and passion, a creation of his or her own imagination—can make him understand the man thus created in himself and in his infinite relations with nature, with man, and fate, is the true consummate artist; and he or she who can do this best is the greatest. We know a man by his words, his acts, his expressions; we speculate on his future, we anticipate his words and his acts with more or less certainty as we understand the motives of his action and his stalwart or cringing demeanour to the world with its stubborn circumstances. The author must give us the same knowledge of his men and women as we—if we are competent observers—have of the men and women we meet in daily life, the men and women whose actions and passions shape our own courses, and affect our own natures with hopes and fears, likes and dislikes, loves and hates.

Mr. Swinburne distinguishes three classes of writers who attempt this difficult enterprise: "The lowest, which leaves us in a complacent mood of acquiescence with the graceful or natural inventions and fancies of an honest and ingenious workman, and in no mind to question or dispute the accuracy of his transcript from life or the fidelity of his design to the modesty and the likelihood of nature; the second, of high enough quality to engage our judgment in its service, and make direct demand on our grave attention for deliberate assent or dissent; the third, which in the exercise of its highest faculties at their best neither solicits nor seduces nor provokes us to acquiescence or demur, but compels us without question to positive acceptance and belief."\* We question whether this is at all a correct division. We know not what acceptance and belief are worth if they are not founded on grave and deliberate assent or dissent. Mr. Swinburne seems to argue in favour of a supreme court of prejudice which gives no reason, which has no reason for its judgments except that it is compelled to believe. But even if his tripartite division of the doers of imaginative work were right, what should we say to his judgment when he begins to apply these classes to persons, and after placing George Eliot in the second class, goes on to say, "Of the third—if in such a matter as this I may trust my own instinct, that last resource and ultimate reason of all critics in every case and on every question—there is no clearer and more positive instance in the whole world of letters than that supplied by the genius of Charlotte Brontë"?† Now, if we are each to have recourse to these ultimate grounds of belief, then we might be content to say that to

---

\* "Note," p. 9.

† "Note," p. 10.

our instinct Charlotte Brontë does not possess that power of compelling adhesion to and acceptance of her imaginative product in so marked a degree as others; and as we are likely to trust our own instincts in preference to those of another, we might rest satisfied with such a blank contradiction of ultimate effects. But any such appeal to individual instincts must be an end to all criticism, which is not merely an interpreter of impressions, but an exponent of the rational basis of impressions, of sentiments and beliefs; and we prefer to believe that the imaginative work of Currer Bell, like that of George Eliot, must be taken not simply in blind faith like Catholic dogmas, but with questioning and doubt like the more stubborn morsels which Protestants attempt to swallow. To our mind, then, Charlotte Brontë has not succeeded in showing us men and women in the entangled web of circumstances, has not shown us men and women baffled and baffling the strenuous contentions of their moving environment, and allowed us to stand before these human souls, and know and understand their passions, their sufferings, their aspirations, and their fears, with anything like the same broad truth as Fielding, Thackeray, Scott, Eliot, or Sand; and we would account for Mr. Swinburne's mistake in this regard by the fact, that while as a true wide artist of Shakespearian grasp and reach, Currer Bell has not risen so high as others in the task of giving us real men and women moving through the varying world with its varying scenes, she has with more force than these given us true pictures of men and women in the one passion which draws the prime of the sexes impulsively together. She is the artist of the grand overmastering passion which fulfils a woman's existence, and which is the beginning of higher life in men. Her world is a love-toil. Her heroes are lovers; her heroines are women wanting love, loving or lacking love, and that too with the fierceness and energy of a lonely, friendless, unlovely nature, which has found a rough, harsh, shunned human being with whom it can impulsively sympathise, and whom it can ardently adore. If that then is to be the test of true art, we admit Charlotte Brontë's supremacy; but we do not admit that that is all the artist's work. Men do not live by bread alone, and there are other, higher, separate aims and purposes both for men and women which she did not understand, but which are yet as deep, as true as the mutual pleasance of young hearts. When she did attempt to give another turn to a man's ambition, as she did in "Shirley" when she painted Robert Moore, she failed even to make a recognisable human being. When she confined herself to the rough man and his rough passion, as in the case of Rochester and Paul Emanuel, she rose superior almost to any.

Still we think this is but a narrow sphere to move in. We sympathise with Miss Martineau, who condemned the manner in which "all the female characters, in all their thoughts and lives," were represented as "being full of one thing—love." \*

We have seen that Mr. Swinburne happily calls her that "fire-hearted vestal of Haworth;" but is fire the stuff an artist's heart ought to be made of? We think not. We think there ought to be tears too. We saw how her fire scathed the children she handled in her books, how her fire forbade sympathy with those young ones in whom fires are not yet kindled. We think that this want of knowledge of, and sympathy with children, is a part of that very nature which was fire-hearted, although vestal. But without motherly love only half the world was known to her. She could not be wide and beneficent, although she might be devoted and true, without that third revelation in a woman's life—which series begins with birth, then comes love, then motherhood, then death.

But glancing for an instant at the works of the other writers we have mentioned in this disagreeable connection of comparison—a connection which is forced upon us by Mr. Swinburne's repeated references—we find that if they do not know so much of, they know other things than that grand, that terrible passion. They know many men who were not lovers, men who had other aims than successful love, who had other thoughts than the woman they sought. They knew women who were not love-sick; women who knew other sacrifices than sacrifices of the heart, and who had other and as true sorrows as those of the love-lorn. They too, as a proof of it, knew the humorous side of life, and each one of these had deep genuine laughter in their souls, which they have offered in full measure to others. But Currer Bell is too really in love to know humour; laughter is folly to her, and her moods are those of passionate joy or as passionate sorrow. It is not necessary to refer to individual instances from the works of these to make our propositions more certain. These are facts known to every competent reader, and these truths lie at the very core of this matter. True, then, Charlotte Brontë was a consummate genius in transcribing in legible form the passion which interacts between men and women. But when we have said this of her genius we have almost exhausted the matter. She was very far, in our estimation, from being a literary artist. Her stories are arranged upon too mechanical a plan to have real merit as æsthetic wholes. In many instances her characters are altogether irrelevant, and sometimes they are dropped suddenly, like disagreeable acquaint-

---

\* "Monograph," p. 152.



ances. She sometimes anticipates without any proper reason for her beforehand confidences, and often conceals—with the view of sharpening curiosity—by the too palpable expedient of confidences interrupted, and her books are too evidently arranged for the one or two principal characters. As a writer she is powerful, but often in her power rough and slovenly. She overloads many passages, until the surgery of “skipping” is upon the point of being had recourse to. She had, no doubt, some sympathy with nature, although little when compared with Emily’s deep love, and some of her descriptions are eloquent and bold. That quoted by Mr. Swinburne as a specimen—from Louis Moore’s diary in “Shirley”—of exalted and perfect poetry is as follows: “The moon reigns glorious, glad of the gale, as glad as if she gave herself to its fierce caress with love,” \* and of which he says, “Nothing can beat that, no one can match it,” is of the passionate complexion which is not the be-all and end-all of literature. However, we do not wish to dwell upon minor artistic defects in one undoubtedly possessed of what is above art. She must be tried by higher canons. We have pointed out that in the supreme merit of making men she is almost matchless, while these men are at the same time lovers; we have said that in the wider merit of making other men and women with other ends and aims, with higher and deeper hopes and fears, she is more than matched. The central defect is not want of intensity but of extensivity—a want not of depth but of breadth in her view of man, his life, and his destiny; a defect which in our eyes places her below those others who stand in the first ranks of imaginative literature.

Mr. Wemyss Reid, in some judicious criticisms, which help to make his book such a valuable contribution to the library of literary biography, while admitting a lack of literary polish, and also that her range as an artist of character is a very limited one, does full justice to the real merits of these “masterful books.” The absolute sincerity and truthfulness, as he points out, of these so-called “fictions” is certainly one of their real merits, but at the same time we cannot help regarding it as connected with their cardinal defect. Every artist must be true to life as he sees it, and the highest artist sees life in its truest lights. But there the difference between artists lies. There is a higher and a lower truth addressed to those whose observation is competent. There is the truth of bare repetition, which might be given under the sanction of a witness-box oath; and there is the truth of imaginative recollection, which is given under the sanction and

---

\* “Note,” p. 56.

Still, lest we should, by some misapplied praise which has been bestowed upon Currer Bell, have been driven rather to "contradict and confute" such expressions than to "weigh and consider" her unquestionable merits, we would here say, in conclusion, that withal we have a deep abiding admiration for the woman with the strong heart but no less capable virtue; and that we have a reverence and respect for the writer of books which have been much to us in the past, and which will continue to be much to us in the future. For the help given to understanding the woman and her circumstances we are grateful to Mr. Wemyss Reid, and for much which has so eloquently fallen from Mr. Swinburne we feel that no less grateful acknowledgment is due.

---